

From a distance, treatment for brain injuries

A North Bethesda organization says it is waging a battle against the “emerging but silent epidemic” of traumatic brain injury in postwar Iraq.

A little more than a year ago, employees of JBS International, a firm of government contractors, traveled to Iraq to help physicians treat a population affected by war.

Now the group is connecting with Iraqi doctors online to help educate them about treating traumatic brain injuries.

In moderate to severe cases, traumatic brain injury, or TBI, affects memory, attention, speed of processing and higher-level reasoning, said Mark L. Ettenhofer, a professor at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences. “It’s also common for people to have some sort of emotional difficulties related to the brain directly,” he said.

According to Eileen Elias, a former mental health commissioner for Massachusetts who went on the trip, the goal was to take on traumatic brain injury.

Jerri Shaw, an owner of JBS, said the effects of traumatic brain injury in many victims in Iraq are compounded by other factors.

“There’s a ripple effect. There are lots of consequences of brain injury,” she said.

At that meeting in Iraq, physicians put together a plan to deal with traumatic brain injury.

Then, U.S. troops and aid workers left the country, and “the strife has just intensified,” Shaw said.

Elias and her colleagues have been doing their work pro bono since they first proposed focusing on the issue nearly five years ago.

Elias, Shaw and others are trying to find low-cost ways to help physicians in Iraq treat traumatic brain injury, despite being thousands of miles away. They create digital data archives with the latest research or link Iraqi doctors with U.S. doctors who can be mentors.

“One of the reasons we built the company was because we wanted to do things like this that no one else was doing



GREG DOHLER/THE GAZETTE

Eileen Elias has helped to provide resources, such as digital data and professional mentors, for Iraqi doctors.

but needed to be done,” Shaw said.

“Most people will say to me, ‘If there’s no money, why are you paying attention to this issue?’” Elias said. “I continue to say, ‘We were there. We have stepped out. There continue to be problems.’”

The fighting in Iraq has made traveling there too dangerous. A lack of support from other organizations means little progress has been made, she said.

Elias said she first began working on traumatic brain issues 20 years ago, when she was a mental health commissioner.

With JBS, she proposed a project to work with soldiers returning from Iraq with traumatic brain injury, she said. She and others realized this was a serious problem for Iraq’s civilian population as well.

She, Shaw and others say they feel some responsibility. “It’s a war we went into — it left a lot of people questioning, ‘What did we accomplish?’” Elias said. “We have not finished our work.”

Capt. David Tarantino said TBI is increasingly being recognized as an “emerging but silent epidemic.” The military doctor served at Marine Corps headquarters as director of the Marines’ medical programs, which cover TBI.

“TBI is a huge challenge for Iraq, as it is for any developing country or any country undergoing security issues,” he said.

It’s also a significant issue in the United States.

JBS International tends to population of sufferers in Iraq amid postwar struggles

BY ST. JOHN BARNED-SMITH
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Ettenhofer said 1.7 million people in the United States suffer traumatic brain injuries each year. Of those, about 50,000 are fatal, he said. Roughly 1.4 million people who suffer injuries are treated and released. An additional 275,000 injuries are moderate or severe and require hospitalization.

Those numbers do not account for people who do not seek treatment, he said.

In Iraq, from 2000 to 2013, there were about 288,000 traumatic brain injuries among U.S. servicemen and women,

Ettenhofer said. Numbers for the Iraqi population are not known, but “being active duty in a combat zone is a big risk factor,” he said.

The condition has been widely featured in the news in the United States in connection with professional and high school football players who died or have been seriously injured by concussions.

Shaw said there is not enough awareness domestically “that TBI happens here, when kids fall off bikes, [are in] car accidents, just in the normal process of living, and need treatment.”

In Iraq, the condition has become a secondary, lurking menace, Elias said.

“It’s not the one trauma. It’s repetitive,” she said. “It’s one of those hidden cognitive disorders, yet its impact is huge.”

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As war strife lingers, Bethesda firm focuses on brain trauma